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Braided Essay for *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio  
  
**I. Masks**  
Masks serve to hide or disguise one’s true identity. They are devices beneath which one can escape reality and appear to be something or someone they are not. Everyone wears a figurative mask at various points in their lives, whether through the act of hiding their true selves and emotions, or behaving in ways that are not reflective of their actual identities. We use masks to pretend, to escape, and to avoid being seen for what we truly are. It is a human pattern, prevalent at least in some form, in all facets in one’s life. This pattern of hiding oneself behind a “front” or mask is evident in R.J. Palacio’s *Wonder*. Through the individual voices and experiences of the varying characters, these unique masks are revealed, and we learn their true identities and how their masks served to hide or shadow them.   
  
**II. Bravery**  
Though bravery is a mask we all think that we would like to own, it is one that comes with many consequences. Often during the hardest situations in life, we strive to look the most assured and confident. August also portrays this “front” of bravery during difficult situations. For instance, there are many times we see August try to wear this mask of bravery when trying to reflect a nonchalant attitude towards his unfortunate physical fate. When he is trying his hardest to make light of the situation by making fun of himself, it seems as though he is doing this to let everyone know he is not afraid of what they think of him. This self-confidence and laid back attitude hides August’s true emotions: those of insecurity and anger about his appearance. Likewise, there are various times that he seems to simply avoid awkward situations because there is power in not responding and simply ignoring hurtful comments and attitudes.   
  
August is not the only one who fakes his way through life’s trials and tribulations by wearing a figurative mask of bravery. His sister, Via holds all of her emotions in until they explode. For instance, though she is ashamed of her embarrassment about her brother’s deformity, she puts on a mask of bravery and strength and outwardly accepts him and all of the attention, stares, and comments his face brings about. She feels as though she should appear to be strong and completely comfortable with the way her brother looks, along with the neglect she feels from her “Auggie-centered” family. By this outward expression and attitude, Via’s mask is one of bravery and acceptance, when in reality, it is shielding feelings of embarrassment, anger, and jealousy.   
  
Via’s boyfriend, Justin, likewise shadows himself behind a mask of bravery. When initially meeting Via’s family, he attempts to hide his nervous ticks and the fact that he comes from a shattered home life. His facade exists mainly because he feels he needs to be a support system for Via as she faces struggles in her own life.   
  
The character that seemed to have the most trouble keeping on the mask was Jack, who eventually let the stress of leading a double life get to him. After first pretending that he wasn’t friends with Auggie, he eventually overcame his weakness and stood up against his“friends” to show his true identity as Auggie’s best friend. Similarly, even though he acted like the rumors and hurtful notes did not bother him,   
  
**III. Weakness**  
While August, at times, hides behind a mask of bravery, there are also instances in which he dons a “mask” of weakness. Because August has seemingly been coddled all of his life, he sometimes falls into the role of victim when he is actually stronger and braver than he appears. For instance, after a heated argument with his mother and Via, August storms to his room, buries himself beneath a pile of stuffed animals and waits for his mother to come, apologize, and figuratively “make everything better.” When she doesn’t respond, August leaves his shelter and maturely seeks her out. In this moment, August reveals that when faced with uncertainty and anger, August knows *how* to handle the experience independently and maturely, though he does not always show it.   
  
Via’s best friend, Miranda also masks herself behind weakness. While at summer camp, she pretends to have Via’s life, telling everyone of her little brother with a deformed face. In this lie, Miranda appears to her camp friends as someone whose depressing life deserves praise and attention. While she, herself, appears strong and worthy of respect, her story is that of her weak brother, thereby presenting a false character to her peers. She uses this mask of weakness so that others will feel sorry for her and see her as someone who can persevere through such a challenging life situation.   
  
In some ways, August’s friend, Jack also shadows himself in a cloud of false weakness. Though he genuinely likes and appreciates August’s friendship, to others, he acts as if the friendship is fake and only exists because he was required to be nice to August by the principal. While this experience does not directly reveal Jack as being weak, it hints to his seemingly weak nature. When confronted about his friendship with August, he bends, saying what the popular students want to hear. However, as is revealed later in the novel, Jack is actually a strong, independent character. He stands up for August when they are confronted on the class trip and allows himself to be shunned by his classmates after punching Julian. In this manner, we see Jack’s strength of character and understand that his prior weakness was, in fact, a front.   
  
Via’s boyfriend, Justin similarly masquerades behind a false pretense of weakness. This is portrayed when he first meets Via’s parents. Nervous for the meeting, Justin stutters and experiences anxiety-driven, physical ticks. While this is a direct result of Justin’s fragile nerves during this tense moment, it also portrays him as a weak character, when in fact, he is quite emotionally and maturely strong. This strength is later reflected as he stands up for Jack when Jack is being harassed by Julian.   
  
**IV. “Cool” or Popular (part of the “in crowd”)**  
Society places high value on popularity and the ability to fit in to societal norms. It can be presumed that everyone attempts to fit in at some point during their lives by wearing a  figurative mask and hiding their true selves, as to be accepted or viewed as popular. This is one of August’s main concerns as he heads off to school, for he does not want his face to dictate his popularity or ability to make friends. We see August succumb to peer pressure when he cuts off his braid he has grown, along with his best friend, to be like the *Star Wars* characters. In doing so, he hopes to eliminate anything that could cause more of a reason for the other students to single him out. In similar fashion, August refuses to take his *Star Wars* luggage with him on the school’s overnight trip, for fear of being made fun of or ridiculed. In these instances, August disguises his genuine interests and feelings in the attempts to be accepted and popular. Likewise, it is through his very voice, that we see him seemingly trying to be “cool” when he is texting Jack using popular text lingo and acronyms. Furthermore, his disappointment in knowing that he will always be a bit of an outsider furthers his quest to appear cool through the jokes that he makes about himself.   
  
August is not the only character that wears a mask in order to be accepted. Jack’s trip to popularity took quite a different route. Originally, Jack appears to be apathetic to the lure of popularity. However, when ridiculed and harassed for being August’s friend (a role in which he actually enjoys), he lies about his true motives for maintaining the friendship. He joins in with the others, criticizing and condemning August. His behaviors exemplify his innate desire to fit in and be accepted by his “popular” classmates, while hiding the fact that he truly enjoys August’s company and friendship. In similar fashion, Jack again hides his true feelings after discovering and revamping a discarded sled. Initially excited and proud of his accomplishment, he hides his true feelings after finding out that the sled was unwanted and left by a wealthier classmate. In doing so, Jack again shields his true self in order to avoid the harsh judgemental attitudes of his peers.  
  
In some ways, Summer also demonstrates the desire to be accepted, and thus hides parts of her true self behind a facade. For instance, though she badly wants to dress as a unicorn for Halloween, she chooses not to wear her costume to school for fear of being viewed as childish and strange. Furthermore, she also attends the Halloween party with the “cool” students, even though is not necessarily friends with them.   
  
The younger characters are not the only ones who hide their true feelings behind a mask of popularity. In fact, it seems as though the mask becomes denser with age. For example, Via’s friend, Miranda goes to great lengths to alter her appearance, dying her hair pink and wearing revealing clothing, in order to be accepted in her new high school. Likewise, she blatantly lies to her summer camp friends, telling them about her younger brother with a physical deformity. In essence, she takes on Via’s life with the intentions of gaining attention, popularity, and to have an emblematic spotlight placed upon her.   
  
Via also drapes herself in a shroud of false emotion. Although she longs to be no longer be classified as “Auggie’s Sister,” she does not initially reveal this to her family. Her figurative “mask,” is one of avoidance as she tries to enter high school hiding the shame and embarrassment she feels about August. She wants people to know her for her personality, accomplishments, and behaviors, not for her brother and his physical differences. Although her mask does not necessarily denote one of popularity or “coolness,” it does reflect her desire to fit in and be accepted by others. School is her outlet and a place where she can just be Via; thus, she tries to hide her family and their issues.   
  
**V. Literal “Mask”**   
Throughout the novel, these characters’ figurative masks are depicted and revealed in a variety of experiences and situations. However, Palacio also relies on the use of literal masks of sorts to convey this theme of hiding and shielding one’s true self.   
  
The most predominant “mask” presented is August’s face itself. Though not a genuine, removable mask, August’s face sets the scene for this overriding theme of disguising and hiding one’s feelings. In many ways, August relies on his face and people’s reactions to it as ways to hide and eclipse his emotions. Because he assumes that people will shun or not accept him, he is much more reserved and apprehensive with others than he is at home. In this manner, his actual face serves as a mask, obscuring and limiting the revelation of his true personality to others.   
  
In relation, August also relies on his astronaut’s helmet to mask his identity. Behind it, August is able to shield his appearance from others, thus hiding his true self and emotions. While wearing it, no one can see August’s physical appearance or any facial expressions that might give away his emotional state. Hence, the helmet is yet another device for hiding or pretending to be someone different.   
  
The use of the literal “bleeding scream” mask also plays a key role in the theme of hiding one’s identity and feelings. When August wears this masks, he is able to momentarily escape his appearance, and become simply another, “normal” kid. He walks through his school’s hallway confidently, high-fiving other students who are unaware of the person behind the mask. It is also while wearing this mask that he is able to overhear conversations between Jack, Julian, and other students that criticize and ridicule August. It is while overhearing this conversation that August learns of these students’ seemingly true dislike for him. Thus, August’s literal mask helped shield his identity, thereby allowing him to discover the true nature of others.